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ABSTRACT

Names themselves have great power. Teachers and students of language know that certain words resonate and have the power to make connections to forces that cannot always be identified, or, at least, named. Names are certainly in this category of words--they define an individual, tell who he or she is, and connect a person to his or her ancestors and past. The magical power of names and naming is recounted in myths and stories from ancient cultures. An opening day exercise for a writing class is described. It begins by asking students to write down their names, then brainstorm lists of words, images, and feelings conjured up by their names. After a classroom discussion and reading of stories and articles by the teacher, students then write their own name stories. Through these exercises, students can experiment with their writers' voices, explore their personal histories, and identify images that speak to them, providing a historical context and personal meaning for their own writing. (Contains 5 references.) (CR)

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ED 403 581

What's in a Name?

by Susan R. Blau

When we talk about emotion, intuition, archetypes, and dreamscapes as legitimate places from which writing emerges, it seems particularly appropriate that my thinking about the magical power of names and naming came from a dream. No matter how many years I teach, I still approach each semester with a mixture of fear and excitement, and these pre-semester emotions often play themselves out in anxiety dreams. Often, I'm in front of a class and realize suddenly that I'm supposed to teach Spanish, which I know slightly--or, even worse, Calculus, which I don't know at all.

A few years ago I had a new type of anxiety dream. I dreamed that I had lost the class list, When I stood in front of the class on the first day of term and looked out at my students, they began to disappear, as though they were being erased from top to bottom. In my dream I found this terrifying, and I became paralyzed, unable to speak.

After I awoke, I began to think about the image that the dream presented to me, that people whose names are lost or destroyed can disappear, be rendered invisible and powerless. Implicit in this way of thinking, of course, is that names themselves have great power.

As teachers--and students--of language, we know that certain words resonate and have the power to move us, to connect us to forces that cannot always be identified....or, at least, named. (We know that we know things intuitively, feelingly, non-cognitively.)

Our names are certainly in this category of words. Our names define us, tell us who we are but also connect us to our own pasts. On a literal level our names link us to our ancestors, on a metaphorical level to some larger, collective unconscious or shared past where the distinction is erased between word and object, symbol and thing symbolized. Joseph Campbell talks about this way of thinking in *Primitive Mythology*. He says, "...the names of things are thought by all children and by most archaic thinkers to be intrinsic to things...as their audible aspect." (85) A person's name is both literally and symbolically part of that person. For the ancient

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mythmakers and philosophers, a person's name was as much a part of the person as ears, head, or heart.

Myths and stories from ancient cultures show us this way of thinking. In many cultures, to know someone's name is to have power over that person. The Hopis, for example give children a real name at birth that is only used within the family. A nickname or social name is used outside the family for fear that if someone with evil powers, a witch, for example, were to know your real name, you would be in that person's power. In western folk lore, the story of Rumplestilskin plays out that fear. When the Miller's daughter discovers his name, Rumplestilskin stamps his foot so hard that he splits in two. His power was destroyed when his name was uttered.

Thomas Mann writes about the Biblical story "Joseph and His Bretheren" in which Joseph, speaking of a lion, says "and the beasts too, they are ashamed and put the tail between their legs because we know them and have power over their names and can thus render powerless the roaring might of the single one, by naming him." (Hayakawa, 48) It's not too much of a leap to suggest that these thinkers and story tellers knew a truth that is foundational to modern talk therapy. When we can name our inner beasts, we can tame them.

As we have seen, the magical power of names and naming is recounted in ancient stories, and as I will soon show, it is also replayed in modern ones. Interestingly, Jung defines an archetype as a "pattern of instinctual behavior," or, recurring motifs that we can trace through ancient stories and myths and that occur independently in dreams and modern stories. (ref) It seems a good bet that the magical ability of names to confer or steal power is one of the archetypal themes.

From all this evidence--from paying attention to my own dream, through research and reflection, to listening to my students--I created this opening-day exercise for my writing class:

Day 1

•I begin the first class by asking students to write down their full names on pieces of paper. I then ask them to look at their names

and then brainstorm lists of words, images and feelings that their names conjure up.

In the class discussion that follows, students usually talk about their anger at being called by the wrong name or a sibling's name, or of feeling disconnected from their names ("When I hear my name announced at basketball introductions, I always have to look around me before I realize that I am the name that's being called out.") as well as pride in being linked to a certain ethnic group, family or namesake.

Once they have written their names on pieces of paper, students often seem to regard their names differently. They are now subjects of study, somewhat disconnected from who they are and yet paradoxically connected to their memories and stories.

•This is a good time to begin telling the stories about names from myth and folk lore. I tell a few stories, like the ones I mentioned earlier, where the very utterance of a name can strip someone of power. Other stories show how names can be used to heal or change someone's life for the better. For example, one folk legend claims that a bad man can be reformed if his name were written on a slip of paper and then boiled in a kettle. A Jewish tale tells of how a dying man or woman can be brought back to life and outwit the angel of death by changing his or her name at the moment of death. In the Jewish Talmud, a spell against blindness is constructed from the letters that form the name Shabriri, the demon of blindness. The incantation "Shabriri, abriri, riri, ri" forces the demon to disappear as his name is incrementally erased. (Funk and Wagnalls, 4)

Students are quick to add references from popular culture, usually films, to the stories about names bestowing and stealing power. (The current favorites are Beetlejuice and Candyman.)

•At this point, I read from an article called "What's in a Name?" by William Parent. In the first few paragraphs Parent presents his tongue-in-cheek theory of "the hierarchy of yclepic bias," a theory on names and personalities that suggests "in its simplest form" that "a man named Waldo Snoutler can never be President of the United States. It recognizes that even if Waldo could change his name to

Walmere Snoutlerton 3rd, it would not matter. Beneath the patina of pseudonym there would still be old Waldo, a round man with a funny hat." (11)

Parent's ycleptic hierarchy rates names on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being reserved for the great names, the names that "...had a certain elegance, rhythm, alliteration, or pizzazz that empowered their packages." Parent further elaborates, "Andy Mazzone was an 8 whether or not your pronounced the 'e,' but Richard Orpen scored only a 2. Dave Morse, for directness scored about a 7.4. Al Jason, I thought was set for life, but William Neeb and Matthew Burns were in trouble. " (11)

The playfulness of this rating method allows students to have some fun with their names as they rate them on this ycleptic hierarchy scale, but their scores are often litmus tests that reveal their degree of self-acceptance. My students generally rate their names in the middle range (fours, fives and sixes), but when I've done this same exercise with groups of teachers or other professionals, the scores are always much higher (eights, nines and tens).

•I then ask students to read their names and scores outloud and introduce themselves to the class in this fashion. I've noticed that a subtle power shift occurs when students read their own names and introduce themselves. Students gain power--even stature--as they name themselves. And by being funny or serious or clever, they begin to create their own classroom voices.

•The final part of day one moves them into writing their own name stories. I ask students to think about how they would feel if I decided to call them by a different name because the names they just announced were too difficult or too inconvenient for me to remember. As the previous piece of this exercise demonstrated, in a minor way, how names can give power, this part asks them to think about how power can be stolen or destroyed through names.

I end the class by reading a passage from Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* Angelou tells the story of how her personal power was stolen when her employer changed her name.

Angelou's given name was Marguerite Johnson, but people generally called her Margaret. Only her family called her Maya.

Mrs. Cullinan hired her to work in her kitchen and decided that "Margaret" took too long to say, and so renamed her Mary. "Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being 'called out of his name,'" (91) Angelou writes and chronicles the taboo names African-Americans have been called over the years to steal their dignity and destroy their power. "It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks." (91)

She and her brother Bailey plot her revenge. She drops her employer's most prized dishes loudly and dramatically on the tiled floor. When Mrs. Cullinan's friend asks, "Who did it? Was it Mary?" Mrs. Cullinan replies, "Her name's Margaret, goddamn it, her name's Margaret." (p. 93)

By reclaiming her real name, Angelou reclaims her power. When Mrs. Cullinan calls her by her right name, she is forced to acknowledge who "Margaret" is. For Maya Angelou, it is a triumphant moment of healing and renewal.

Students never fail to be moved by this story and find connections to both the revenge-on-an-uncaring-employer theme and the power-of-name theme. It's a good place to end the first class, and students go off to write their own name stories.

Day 2

What they come back with is as varied and interesting as the students themselves. I ask them to underline words or images that are at the heart of their pieces. Each student, in turn, reads while the rest write down words or images that they find particularly memorable.

Students often write about roll call on the first day of class. Here's an excerpt from Rick's story about waiting for his name to be called.

My right had left a moist mark on the notebook. I

> could hear my heart thumping a little faster. The professor carefully sounded out each name. She tried all the possibilities...I laughed nervously as she got closer to the letter E.
>
> "R-R-R-R-Rudolfo," she said, inflecting a dramatic Spanish accent.
>
> By habit, I cut her off halfway through "Escueta" with an abrupt "Rick." Hearing teachers say my legal name, I feel as though they're blurting out a dirty secret. So I try to stop them before they go too far.
>
> "Rick!" she quacked in a nasal voice. "Rick, Rick," adding in disbelief. "Years of taking Spanish, and it's Rick. O.K."
>
> "But I'm not Spanish," I thought.
>
> She bent down to scribble my nickname next to Rudolfo. People were laughing, and I was on fire.

Even though he writes with humor and wry self-awareness, Rick's name story shows how his name is connected to his sense of self. When people use names to make assumptions about who we are, we can, as Rick does, feel diminished.

Students also write about times when their names conferred power. Mike, a self-confessed "product of....one of the most isolated and repressive private schools" wrote about names giving power in a direct and literal way. He began his name story by talking about traditions taking on "lives of their own" at his prep school. Those who broke the unwritten codes, he wrote, were doomed to social exile.

> Names and nicknames are at the heart of the code....It took me a few weeks to realize that their respected family names were a ticket into the club. Their fathers and grandfathers had all attended G____. Everyone seemed to have roman numerals following their last names. I was still just "Mike" to the rest of the class. I do not think we were ever conscious of the name game we played. It was a ritual, like any other, and we all bit the hook.

In Mike's prep school world, being called by your first name diminished your status, but being called by your family name conferred power.

By the end of the second class, all of the students have experimented with their writers' voices, explored a small part of their personal histories, and identified the images that spoke to them from the collective writings of their peers. And, on a practical level, they have broken the ice, begun to build the trust so necessary for a writing class, and learned each other's names.

On a more global level, this exercise provides students with an historical context and personal meaning for their own writing. As it connects them to the reservoir of stories in myth and folk tale, it makes them consider their names as extensions of their very beings, as links to their personal and collective histories. By setting their own experiences in the context of myth and story, students can find the universal themes in their own lives. And, as was always the underlying goal, they can discover that these universal themes in their own experiences validate their stories and make them worth telling.

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